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Outpost of Soviet influence

IN the spring of 1983, a revealing conversation took place in Moscow between the Soviet Union's then top military man, Marshal Nikolai Ogarkov, and the Army chief of staff from Grenada, Einstein Louison. According to Grenadian minutes, Marshal Ogarkov said that "over two decades ago, there was only Cuba in Latin America; today there are Nicaragua, Grenada, and a serious battle is going on in El Salvador."

The countries listed were presumably those the Soviet military saw as outposts of Soviet influence and bases for spreading it further.

Cuba remains in hock to the Soviet Union. Grenada has dashed Soviet hopes, and the three secret military agreements its previous leaders signed with Moscow are no longer in effect. In El Salvador, a democratically elected President, José Napoleón Duarte, is holding his own against Marxist guerrillas. Which brings us to Nicaragua.

Nicaragua today has 100,000 men under arms, compared with a maximum of 14,000 during the Somoza regime. The Soviets have armed that force with tanks, armored vehicles, and the MI-24 ground attack helicopter. The Nicaraguans have built airfields for high-speed jets and have sent pilots to Eastern Europe for flight training. To American knowledge, no high-performance combat planes have yet been delivered to Nicaragua, probably because of ominous and clear-cut warnings to Moscow.

All this gives Nicaragua the biggest military force in Central America. The Nicaraguans argue that they need all this because of the Yanqui threat.

That does not explain why, as Salvadorean President Duarte charged last year, the Nicaraguans are fueling the Marxist revolution in his country, "sending in weapons, training people, transporting bullets." Some of those bullets come from Ammunition Factory No. 10 in Bulgaria. Some of the equipment used by the Salvadorean guerrillas was manufactured in North Vietnam. Some of it is American, seized by the North Vietnamese after the fall of Saigon.

So much for Nicaragua's capacity for mischief outside its borders.

At home, Nicaragua has brutalized the Miskito Indians. It humiliated the

Pope and has harassed the church. It has shackled the press. It conducted "elections" last year that were a mockery of the democratic process. Some clerics in Nicaragua wave all this aside, because, they say, the Sandinistas are really trying to help the poor. Some human rights activists, so vocal against repression in countries where the regimes are pro-Western, seem curiously muted about repression in a country that enjoys fandangoing to Moscow's tune.

Frustrated by all this, the Reagan administration has four options:

1. Direct military action by the US.
2. Overt military aid to the *contras*, the "freedom fighters," or "counterrevolutionaries," depending on one's point of view, who have set themselves against the Marxist Sandinista regime.
3. Covert aid to the *contras*.
4. No governmental support for the *contras*, but a policy of diplomatic and economic pressure on Managua.

There is little public support for the first option, and the second would be virtually a declaration of war.

The third option would be tough to get through Congress. But President Reagan is going to fight for it.

The fourth option is basically what the administration has been pursuing while Congress has frozen the *contra* funding. But the administration's view is that it has not worked too well. So it has suspended the talks it has been having with the Nicaraguans at the Mexican town of Manzanillo, and last week's discussion between Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega does not seem to have brought the two sides closer.

The problem of Nicaragua is complex. The American options are hardly ideal. But one critical question has yet to be resolved within the Reagan administration: What is the President's toleration point? If the Sandinista regime stays home, minds its own business, and lets its neighbors live in peace, is that enough? Or must the regime give the opposition a fair chance to run, and the people a fair chance to vote? Or does the President's desire for structural change in Nicaragua mean that the incumbent regime must commit an act of political self-strangulation?